THE COURAGE TO BE

Colgate University

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There is something wonderfully timeless about this and profoundly important, and I am always grateful to be part of it. So, thank you for inviting me to be the preacher at your Baccalaureate and a participant in this amazing and good day in your lives.

I've attended five of these as a parent and if I stretch memory ~~a little~~ even more, I recall sitting there where you are sitting this morning, in a kind of suspended animation, bleary-eyed tired from the over-exertions of last evening's party; savoring a mixture of relief that I actually made it, a little nostalgic about leaving — actually there wasn't much of that — at the moment I was pretty happy with the prospect of getting out of there. Nostalgia comes later. And I recall a bit of boredom. Someone did a study to see what graduates remembered from their gradation day ten years later. Sermons and speeches were pretty low on the list.

(2) speaking of which — at about 2:15 am I thought the Colgate Inn was under attack, what with all the artillery + small arms fire outside my window.

A Doonesbury column portrayed this event — a university graduation. Three robed graduates are staring blankly ahead. One is reading *Vogue* magazine. Another is plugged into his walkman. The third looks up to the podium and asks, "Who's the old guy?" His friend responds, "I think he the President." The questioner asks, "Of what?"

We do subject ourselves to a lot of rhetoric because everybody knows it is important occasion, a defining moment if you will, a real milestone preceded by a lot of work and investment — on your part — intellectually, physically, emotionally, and not the least, financially. You have a lot riding on this occasion. And for you, so do your families. Parents like graduations. They are proud and happy. And some of them are thinking right now, "Tomorrow we are going to be rich."

And the institution is deeply invested. The administration hopes you have paid your bills and will now become a contributor, which is an altogether good thing to do and a necessary thing I hasten to add — to keep this enterprise vital and strong for your children.

And the faculty will remember you and follow you and will watch attentively as your future enfolds. They hope you will remember their names — which I know you will.

This event happens at a critical moment in our history. We are all a little bit tired of hearing September 11 referenced in every public utterance and, yet, there is truth to the overused euphemism that we live in a very different world now. And my proposal to you this morning, in this extraordinary time, my admonition and my prayer for you is that you will respond to this moment in history and this important moment in your histories with — courage.

There is a story almost 3,000 years old that is tailor made for the occasion. I use this story cautiously, painfully aware that there are people dying in Palestine and in Israel on the basis of this story's historical uses — geographically and politically. And I want at the outset to disassociate myself entirely from the appropriateness of this story to support anybody's ideological or political agenda.

Having said that, I want to use it anyhow because there is truth in it. — not about geo-politics — but about the geography of the human heart.

Back almost on the edge of recorded history, a loose federation of nomadic people had been wandering around in the desert for forty years. And now they need to decide what to do next. It is a time of high anxiety, high potential and not a little fear. That is to say, they are not unlike the class of 2002 on graduation day.

They are standing on a hill, looking over a river, and seeing for the first time, the Promised Land — the future. For forty years they have been moving from oasis to oasis. Their liberator and leader, Moses, always pushing, prodding, pulling, scolding, teaching, not unlike a parent or professor or Dean or advisor. But now he's old. It's the end of the line and he knows it. He's not going with them any further. And so he gives them a lot of last minute advice, says the kinds of things we parents are inclined to say: you know, do your laundry, eat vegetables, get your sleep, tuck your shirt in, ~~shine your shoes~~. So old Moses is going on — "Do the right thing, obey the law, hold onto one another..." and the climax of what he says to them is this:

> "I call heaven and earth to witness — I have set before you life and death. Choose life so that you may live."

There's a remarkable idea in that little sentence: that people are responsible for their future. The matter was and is in their hands now. They had a choice to make and it will require courage — the courage to be. That is the title, by the way, of one of the most important books of my generation, written by the late Paul Tillich, one of the most important philosophers and theologians of the last century, a refugee from Nazi Germany. Tillich wrote:

> "Courage as the universal and essential self-affirmation of one's being is an ontological concept. The courage to be is the ethical act in which humans affirm their own being in spite of those elements of their existence which conflict with their essential self-affirmation."
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> [Tillich, *The Courage to Be*, Yale University Press, 1952, p.3]

~~William~~ Shakespeare said that a little more poetically and clearly: Hamlet laments, "O God! God! How weary, stale and unprofitable seem to me all the uses of this world."

And then in lines that put the matter powerfully and clearly:

"To be, or not to be: that is the question."

The late Rollo May, psychiatrist, philosopher, wrote a lot about it.

> "Courage," he said, "is not one virtue out of many: it is the foundation of all virtue. Courage is necessary to make being possible. ~~Acorns become oak trees and kittens become cats automatically. But a man or woman becomes fully human only by his or her choices.~~ People attain worth and dignity only by the multitudes of decisions they make day to day. Those decisions require courage." [*The Courage to Create*, W.W. Norton, New York, 1975, p. 4,5]

The truth is — and if you haven't discovered it yet, you will — the truth is that life sometimes knocks the courage to be out of us. Paul Tillich said, "There are elements of existence which conflict with our essential self-affirmation." What was he talking about? Well, fear, for instance. Fear of the future. Fear of failing. Fear of criticism. Fear of death. Fear causes us to give up, give in, lower our sights, expectations, hopes, aspirations and choose non-being instead of being.

Isn't that what happens every time you and I decline to try something adventuresome and demanding and exciting because we're afraid we might fail, or that we'll be inconvenienced, or that we don't know how it will turn out? Isn't that what happens when you and I look out at the world and see a multitude of horrendous problems and shudder, or wring our hands and then turn our backs? We see, for instance, a political and educational system that can't seem to figure out how to pay for quality education for all our children; a healthcare system that cannot seem to get services to all the sick people; ~~an urban environment characterized by a crisis in the simple existence of civil society~~ + in our great cities concentrations + pockets of despair, enclaves of second and third generation unemployed men and adolescent mothers, selling drugs to and shooting at one another. Isn't it a denial of our being as humans, to walk away from all that and retreat to privileged enclaves of affluence? the + from which must if we live this morning have come?

The courage to be, the will to choose life can be knocked out of us...in the very middle of life by a variety of things.

Bob Greene wrote a thoughtful column a ~~few weeks ago~~, which recalled Franklin D. Roosevelt's famous statement during the Depression: "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself," and how it reassured a frightened

nation. Greene suggested that it's different since September 11, that if all we have to fear is fear itself. "Today," he wrote, "fear is not a hypothetical – it is the everyday item. Evidently those who attacked us do not want our land, our riches, our buildings. What they want is our terror. Fear itself is their goal." [Bob Greene, Chicago Tribune 12/17/2001]

And as a matter of fact the fear quotient among us has escalated significantly, and by [illegible] announcements from the new Department of Homeland Security and the FBI that something terrible might happen anywhere to someone and so we all should be alert. Which translates – be frightened. "Fear," Bob Greene [illegible] "is the new currency of the land – a new industry, a way of life."

During grad season - a cartoon appeared in [illegible] Commencement day

Just [illegible] Sunday, The Chicago [illegible] cartoon. It's graduation day. The cartoon consists of four pictures of a man speaking. In the first he picture he says:

"Watch out for suspicious people. Be careful when opening your mailbox."

In the second:

"Keep away from tall buildings. Be wary traveling around."

In the third, he says:

"Don't take unnecessary risks. Remain at a heightened alert level.

And in last panel you can see that he's addressing a graduation assembly and he concludes:

"And go out and live life to the fullest!"

We've always known that the power of fear as a motivator and market force. Fear sells car alarms and security systems. Fear sells guns—ironically increasing significantly the possibility that they will be used to shoot and kill members of one's own family. Fear causes population shifts as refugees move across international borders and as city dwellers head to the suburbs.

~~Anx~~ Fear limits and paralyzes. Fear of failing prevents us from trying something new, stretching and risking. Children humiliated by a teacher are afraid to speak up and ask a question – sometimes for the rest of their lives. Fear of rejection keeps us from going out for the team, trying out for the part, applying for the job, saying, "I love you, I want you." Someone said that if Michelangelo had been afraid of heights, we'd have the Sistine Chapel floor.

There is something paralyzing about fear, something that reduces the scope of our lives, the extent of our love, the depth of our passion, the generosity of our giving. Fear expressed in our national obsession with security is simply not an adequate national agenda. In fact, it is working to the detriment of our ability – our responsibility – to help build a more peaceful and just world.

Bob Greene is right. There is a lot of fear ~~are a lot of shaking hands and trembling knees~~ in our nation this year. It will be important not to give the terrorists the victory of terrifying us, diminishing us, limiting and restricting us, convincing us to live out of fear and not love and kindness and compassion and courage.

Popular novelist Barbara Kingsolver wrote in the aftermath of September 11th:

"There are millions of us, surely, who know how to look life in the eye however awful things get, and still try to love it back."

And it all begins – not only in the halls of government and boardrooms of big business. It begins here in your heart – where we decide to live fully, in spite of all the reasons not to care, to dream in spite of the heavy weight of current reality.

Ps 139

Dr. Bernie Siegel, a surgeon and professor at Yale Medical School, author of several best sellers, works directly with people who are very sick. Hearing the three words, "You have cancer," often destroys the will to live, the courage to be. So Siegel works hard to nurture the fundamental will to live, to be within each of his patients, no matter how little or much time they have left.

One of them, an 85 year-old woman, gave him a poem that she wrote:

not very good poem - but I love this poem..

"If I had my life to live over...

I would take more chances,

I would take more trips,

I would scale more mountains,

Swim more rivers,

Watch more sunsets,

Eat more ice cream and fewer beans.

I would have more actual troubles

And fewer imaginary ones. You see...

I was one of those people who lived

Prophylactically and sensibly and sanely,

Hour after hour and day after day.

I've been one of those people who never went

Anywhere without

A thermometer, a hot water bottle, a gargle,

A raincoat and a parachute...

If I had it to do all over again,

I'd travel lighter, much lighter...

I would start barefoot earlier

In the spring, and I'd stay that way

Late in the fall. And I would

Ride more merry-go-rounds, and

Catch more gold rings, and greet

More people, and pick more flowers,

And dance more often.

If I had it

To do all over again.

But you see,

I don't."

[Peace, Love and Healing, Dr. Bernie Siegel, Harper Perennial Press, p. 245-246]

It's a choice finally: a personal decision we all make every day of our lives. The occasion for courage comes wrapped in choices: to love or not to love; to get involved or hold back; to serve and help or withdraw; to give your life to something important or to retreat and settle for a good credit rating and secure retirement: to commit self passionately to some improbable and wonderful dream like the peace of the world, the reconciliation of God's people, the healing and feeding and housing of God's children beginning with the children in your own community — or staying at arm's length, the refusal to risk anything, being a spectator instead of a participant.

In Washington DC, with a few hours to spend, we visited the U.S. Holocaust Museum; an unrelenting three hours of pictures, exhibits, films, showing common, good folk, implicated in grotesque evil by little choices, by averting their eyes, by refusing to care. And then, The Hall of Remembrance, a large room, quiet, with candles, a pool, and inscribed on the wall — those haunting words from the edge of history, spoken to frightened people looking into the unknown, unexplored, uncharted future...

"...today I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendents may live..."

So — in the midst of all the advice you will receive today, the good wishes for success and happiness, may I have the privilege of this challenge?

Don't be afraid. Have the courage to care passionately. Find something you care about enough to weep, and work; something to live for; something you love enough to die for.

2000 years ago Jesus said: "Those who save their lives will lose them. And those who lose their lives - give their lives away - will find them."

The gift of life is given to us without condition. It is yours to live, to enjoy, to give. How you do that is a matter of courage.

Colgate's Son, Harry Emerson Fosdick, years ago wrote:
Grant vs wisdom. Grant vs Courage.
For the facing of this hour

The choice is yours this day. every day. The courage to be. God bless you on your way.

Deuteronomy 30: 15-~~20~~ 19

15 See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and
adversity. 16 If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God †
that I am commanding you today, by loving the LORD your God,
walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and
ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the LORD
your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. 17
But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray
to bow down to other gods and serve them, 18 I declare to you today
that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are
crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. 19 I call heaven and earth to
witness against you today that I have set before you life and death,
blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants
may live, 20 loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and holding fast
to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may
live in the land that the LORD swore to give to your ancestors, to
Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.